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ABSTRACT

A female trip leader in the University of Florida's Travel and Recreation Program observed that women and men approached outdoor experiences differently, and suggested a women-only program. From this came the Women in the Wilderness program, a women-only outdoor education program designed to empower women through participation in adventure activities and group discussion. The initial proposal was denied based on the possibility of discrimination charges, but clarification of the program's objectives, involvement of other campus organizations dedicated to supporting women, and availability of counterpart trips to all students convinced the administration to allow the program. The format is a one-semester extended "conference" set in the outdoors with each of three sessions having a theme related to a women's issue and to the outdoor trip and adventure activity scheduled for the session. An informal dinner early in the semester provided a forum for discussing expectations and introducing participants to each other. On the trips, the topics were explored through group discussion, individual discussion, and games. To close the program, all the groups shared their experiences and conclusions with the larger group at a picnic, and evaluated the program via a written questionnaire. Successes of the program are discussed, as are suggestions for improvement. Seven suggestions for beginning a theme-based program were developed: define your objectives, select your format, prepare your staff, get the word out, meet your participants, provide information, and provide closure. (TD)

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WOMEN IN THE WILDERNESS

Theme-Based Outdoor Programming at the University of Florida

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ED 417 044

INTRODUCTION

The Women in the Wilderness program at the University of Florida began this fall with tremendous support from UF's students. The program has been an overwhelming success, and in this report we will outline some of the factors which have caused the Women in the Wilderness program to be so well received. We will also offer some suggestions about how outdoor educators at the university level can build a similar program. This type of programming has the potential to affect the lives of students, more so than through standard outdoor experiences. We hope to see more students and outdoor programs working together to shape positive experiences through theme-based programming.

BACKGROUND

The Women in the Wilderness program began over a year ago with a suggestion from a female trip leader in UF's Travel and Recreation Program (TRiP). Through her experiences, she felt that women and men seemed to approach their outdoor experiences differently, with women (in general) being more supportive and men (in general) being more competitive. Because of these different approaches, women tended to group themselves together during some outdoor activities, encouraging each other as they enjoyed both their individual and group experience. Would women get more from the experience if the trip was made up entirely of women?

In the early stages of the program's inception, while we were still considering its possible benefits, we asked some female participants if they

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thought they would get more out of a program designed only for women. The positive response was overwhelming. Convinced that the program had real potential and support, we proposed our program to the administration. Our program proposal was denied based on the possibility of discrimination accusations.

Our discussion with the administration continued for nearly a year, until we realized that we had to be more clear about our objective and reasons for designing a women's only program. We decided to involve other campus organizations dedicated to supporting women. We also offered counterpart trips on the regular Travel and Recreation Program schedule so that any student had access to the trips we were offering to women. These changes were enough to convince the administration to allow the program on a trial basis in the fall 1996 semester.

PROGRAM OBJECTIVES

We worked to create a statement of purpose which emphasized that women were not the only students who would benefit from the program. We suggested that the program held value for the greater university community:

> The Women in the Wilderness program is designed to empower women by enhancing confidence, leadership, and environmental and self awareness. This will be accomplished through participation in challenging adventure activities and group discussion. We believe that women who posses these qualities are more prepared to affect changes which will improve both the quality of their own lives as well as the lives of those around them.

In order to fulfill the objectives which we set forth, we proposed that the program be conducted in the format of an extended conference. The one-semester conference would be set in the outdoors with each of three sessions having its own theme. The themes were to relate to both a particular women's issue and to the outdoor activity scheduled for the session. By extending the experience in this way, we hoped to offer more time for reflection and more opportunities to share ideas with different groups. We also hoped that by setting the conference in the outdoors, we could create an informal and supportive atmosphere where participants could share ideas freely.

Because the program was conceived and started by trip leaders from the Travel and Recreation Program, TRiP became the parenting organization. We invited the following campus groups to be involved in the program:

- Women's Affairs Cabinet
- Women's Studies Student Association
- Center for Sexual Assault/Abuse Recovery and Education

These groups, or sponsoring organizations, were responsible for the following:

- Promoting the program to their members and the women with whom they work.
- Donating necessary materials, i.e. literature, equipment.
- Providing expertise in their respective areas, both throughout the planning stages and during the program by sending a representative to become part of the Women in the Wilderness staff.

PROGRAM FORMAT

In keeping with our conference format, we held an informal dinner two weeks after registration began. This meeting was designed to accomplish the following:

1. Provide a forum for discussion about both the participants' and the staff's expectations for the program.
2. Inspire enthusiasm about the program through the presentation of an inspirational speaker.
3. Create an atmosphere in which participants would feel comfortable with each other before going on their outing.

Participants were given a T-shirt bearing the program's theme for the year, "Defining ourselves, redefining the world," at the opening dinner as well as a folder which contained general information of interest to women on the University of Florida's campus. Each folder would be added to as the program proceeded, with each individual trip providing information pertinent to their topic.

Three trips were scheduled for the fall semester. First, "Me and my mother: Ecofeminism and women's role in the family," a rock climbing trip to Sand Rock, Alabama. Trip participants would discuss the relationships between women, family, and nature. Next, "The long ride: A woman in a man's world," a mountain biking trip to Tsali, North Carolina. Discussion would center around issues such as sexual harassment, horizontal aggression, and academic success. The last trip, "Untying the knots: Developing positive self-awareness," was a ropes course in Jacksonville, Florida. The group would explore issues such as body acceptance and self-concept.

Staff members, two women leaders from the Travel and Recreation Program and one from a sponsor organization, were encouraged to explore their topics through group discussion, individual discussion, and games. In addition, they were asked to collect information which was not only pertinent to their topic, but which would also inspire understanding and thought about that topic before participants met for their trip. In order for staff members to feel more comfortable with each other and their trip topic, we developed a short staff training program to compliment the standard training trip leaders in the TRiP program receive. Women in the Wilderness training involved both a staff visit to the counseling center in order to discuss some of the issues facing women and gain facilitation skills, and a retreat, which provided time to plan for individual trips while bringing the staff together in the outdoors.

To close the program, a picnic at a local lake-side recreation area has been scheduled. At that time, all of the groups will be reunited in order to share their experiences and report to the larger group some of the conclusions they reached during their trip. Of special interest is the way in which the outdoor activity related to or inspired feelings about their topic. The participants will also be asked to evaluate the program both in discussion and in a written questionnaire at the final meeting.

THEME-BASED OUTDOOR PROGRAMMING

The value of theme-based programming is that it can be used to address any particular issue on a University campus. The outdoors provides an excellent setting for bringing any group of people together to discuss an issue in an informal, supportive, often inspirational setting. The topic and format will be shaped by the campus's needs, the staff's objectives, and the participants' goals. For many campuses, this will mean the creation of some

type of program which addresses issues facing women. As outdoor educators, we need to recognize the role we can play as facilitators of a new awareness for women. The schedule for the 10th I.C.O.R.E. attests to that. However, the theme on which you base your outdoor program can be developed around any group on your campus.

The following are suggestions for beginning a theme-based program from the session handout entitled "Theme-Based Outdoor Programming Inspired by Women in the Wilderness at the University of Florida Travel and Recreation Program (TRiP)":

- ***DEFINE YOUR OBJECTIVES***

Clearly stating your goals from the start will not only increase the administration's understanding of your program, but it will also help you keep focused throughout the planning and implementation of your program. Consider the problem you think needs to be addressed and why, and also why addressing it in the outdoors offers an advantage.

- ***SELECT YOUR FORMAT***

In selecting your format, you will have to consider a number of factors. How long do you have? How many staff people do you have? What are the interests and skill levels of your participants? While you are thinking about these issues, also consider how certain activities by their nature may help move you towards your goal. If, for example, you want to stress teamwork, you will want to select an activity where the group can stay together.

- ***PREPARE YOUR STAFF***

Your staff is the most critical part of your program because they will not only be planning the activities, but their excitement and knowledge will create the experience for the participants. The staff should not only be experienced in outdoor leadership, but should also have a good understanding of the topics which you plan to cover. A well-trained staff will be confident about the program topic, able to facilitate discussion about the topic, and will be excited to share their knowledge. Finding this staff may require looking outside of your outdoor program for qualified, excited, knowledgeable individuals who are willing to invest a good amount of time. Look to campus organizations which specialize in your topic area.

- ***GET THE WORD OUT***

Appropriate publicity can determine the success of your program, and not just because it determines whether or not people sign up. Good publicity will attract the kind of participants who will get the most from your program and have the most to give back. Your publicity should be clear in stating that you are not just offering another set of trips. Being clear from the outset will avoid confusion or disappointment of poorly informed participants.

- ***MEET YOUR PARTICIPANTS***

Get to know your participants before the trip. A questionnaire can be a great tool for learning about participants' backgrounds and what they expect from the program. This will help you tailor the program to fit their needs and yours.

- ***PROVIDE INFORMATION***

In addition to providing group discussion and structured activities, you can add value to your program by collecting information about your topic and organizing it for participants. You may want to direct them to web sites or bibliographies, or you could collect and copy the information. This can give participants time to think about the topic before their trip, or you can give it out after the trip as a way to encourage further thought and interest in the topic.

- ***PROVIDE CLOSURE***

As with any good group outdoor experience, processing the experience is key. Throughout the trips and at the end of the program (if you offer more than one trip), discussions to process information and reach conclusions can be valuable. A gathering to bring all of your participants together at the end of the program can be fun and allow time for reflection and comparison of the different groups' experiences.

- ***KEEP FLEXIBLE***

This rule is familiar to any outdoor activity planner. There are so many things which can change at the last minute that it is virtually impossible to run the same program which you planned. That's OK if you are ready to make last-minute changes and your group understands that changes are to be expected. Although your plans might change, your objectives should not. If everyone is clear about why you have come together, you will have a great experience regardless of the changes you may need to make.

- ***HAVE FUN***

This common-sense rule is easy to forget if you get caught up in programming activities and teaching lessons. Again, like any good program, this requires a balance between having fun in the outdoors and working towards a goal of increased awareness. Find fun ways to share information and feelings. Everything doesn't have to be a long campfire discussion, although they definitely have their place. Play!

LOOKING BACK

With all the detailed planning that occurred before our program began this past fall, it is interesting to look back and reflect on what actually happened. Were the trips a success, did we meet our objectives?

Our biggest success comes in getting thirty-three women involved in an outdoor adventure activity. However, it was important to accommodate the huge range of ability levels within each group. By having three leaders on each trip, we were better able to manage the range in ability and offer three different levels in which to participate. In creating this environment, we were able to make these trips less competitive and more supportive.

The most challenging part in evaluating our program is that each trip was so completely different from the others. The makeup of each group makes it impossible to generalize about what will actually happen on a theme-based trip. Our biggest concern is how to better improve the theme discussion on the trip. Because the trips were female-only, conversation automatically turned towards women's issues. It was often hard to direct the participants into conversation directly related to their unique theme. Most discussions

tended to revolve around being a woman in today's world. Women on our trips wanted to talk about being women, which encompasses all three program topics. In evaluating this part of the program, it may be more effective to give all three trips a broad-based theme, and allow each group to decide how they want to direct conversation within that theme.

We think it is also important to be innovative within the program. During the spring semester we will be trying a different way to encourage women to participate in the outdoors. Instead of offering three weekend trips, as we did in the fall, we are offering one week-long trip during spring break. These women will be able to participate in whitewater rafting, mountain bike riding, and rockclimbing. The theme will again relate to the activities and a chosen topic. It will be interesting to compare experiences between the weekend and week-long trips. We hope this comparison will help us better develop the program to fit the needs of University of Florida women.